**Annotated Text Set - Alex Doyle**

**An Aboriginal Literary Perspective: Exploring the Historical and Contemporary Aboriginal Experience Through a Variety of Mediums**

Introduction:

In an increasingly diverse Canadian population, and therefore classroom, a variety of voices and perspectives must be heard and represented in the material. In the English classroom the effort must be made to use a wide variety of texts that mirror this diversity.

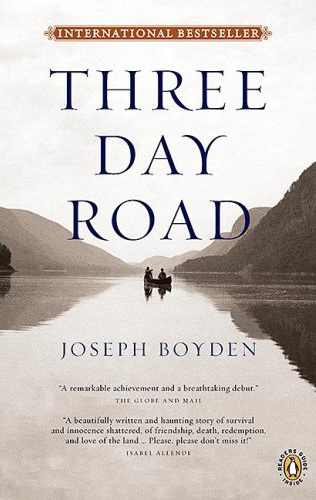
The following collection of texts represents one of these voices that is ever present in Canadian society but that often flies under the radar of the majority. The voice of the Aboriginal Canadian is such an inherent part of our culture but one that is often ignored or underexplored by the general curriculum in our education system.

These modern texts explore a variety of historical and contemporary issues facing the Aboriginal community with a focus on the residential schools and their lasting impact, stereotypes, the role of family relations, and the healing process. These themes are explored from many different angles and in different forms including fiction, non-fiction, drama, graphic novel, media, and speech. Through the study of these texts, students will gain a deeper understanding of the Aboriginal experience. Students will be able to contextualize these themes by making connections to other more familiar subjects and their own lives.

Ideally, the canon of literature would contain a rich enough diversity and be representative of all students in the classroom, as opposed to necessitating a separate text set such as this one. In the mean time, this anthology provides an in-depth exploration of the Aboriginal experience through text.

**1. Fiction**

***Three Day Road***



**By Joseph Boyden**

**Summary**

Joseph Boyden's first novel is the story of two Cree friends, Xavier and Elijah, who leave their pristine northern country to end up in the horrific trenches of World War I. Loosely based on the real life of a famous Canadian sniper, the story is told from two first-person views: those of Xavier and his old aunt and only living relative, Niska. After the war, Niska is taking her wounded nephew back home north to the bush in a canoe. Their trip is the three-day road of the title, which also refers to the journey taken after death. The story of the war is told in flashbacks on this journey as Xavier recovers from morphine addiction. Niska also relates various stories to Xavier, believing there is "medicine in the tale."

**Rationale**

Joseph Boyden is a contemporary Canadian author with a Métis heritage. Boyden creates layered, believable characters and uses powerful imagery that makes his books impossible to put down. *Three Day Road* explores a familiar subject from a generally unfamiliar point of view. From books, movies, television, and our history classes most of us are familiar with World War I and trench warfare. However, rarely do we study this event and time in history from the perspective of Aboriginal peoples. Through Boyden’s storytelling we learn about Cree culture and tradition, in particular the importance of family and storytelling as embodied by Niska. We also gain perspective on what life would have been like for Aboriginals in Canada in the early 20th century and how these race relations followed soldiers like Xavier and Elijah all the way to Europe. (Boyden’s other novel, *Through Black Spruce* as well as his nonfiction history / biography of Louis Riel and Gabriel Dumont are both certainly worth reading and could be included in this anthology as well, however I chose not to include multiple works by the same author).

**2. Media**

**Wab Kinew on First Nations Stereotypes**



**Summary**

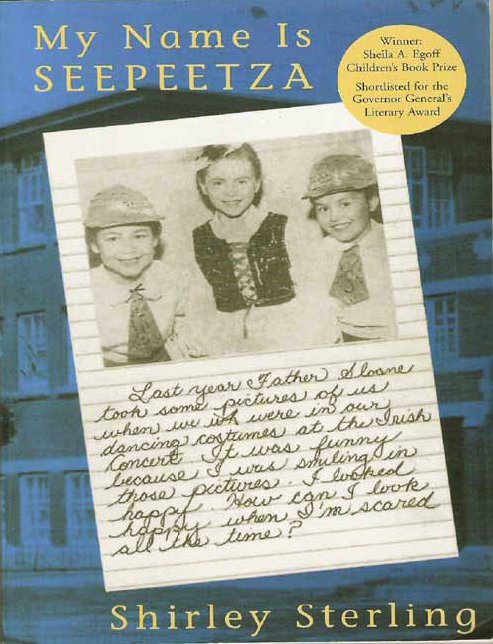
Wab Kinew is a hip-hop artist and CBC radio producer/host based in Winnipeg, Manitoba. Wab exemplifies what it means to be multicultural in Canada today, holding both a Bachelor of Arts degree in economics and training in the traditional Medicine ways of his Anishinaabe people. This particular clip is a short piece from The Hour on CBC in which Wab directly addresses some of the major stereotypes and issues that Canadians often have with Aboriginal people.

**Rationale**

Wab Kinew is a young, intelligent, humourous, and relatable Aboriginal celebrity. His personality as well as his music is accessible to young people. He uses his rap music and his celebrity as platforms to discuss important issues that pertain to the current status of Aboriginals in Canada. Wab and his music can be used as examples of how traditional practices and values are being incorporated into modern life by Aboriginals. This particular clip demonstrates the importance of addressing stereotypes and discrimination rather than ignoring them. It is important to study where these ideas started and to point out their flaws instead of pretending that these ideas are not out there.

**3. Fiction**

***My Name is Seepeetza***



**By Shirley Sterling**

**Summary**

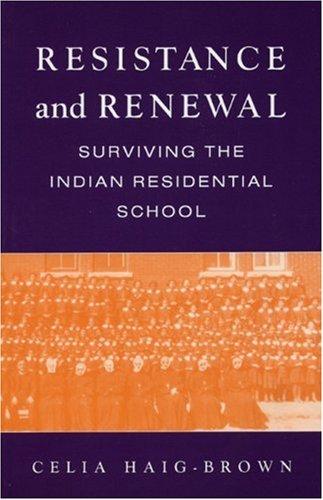
Her name is Seepeetza, but at the Indian residential school in British Columbia, she is called Martha. She hates her white name, but she is beaten if she talks "Indian." Her long hair is cut off. At the same time, the other students pick on her because she has green eyes and looks white. When she wets her bed, the nuns make her wear the wet sheet over her head. She gets in trouble for daydreaming about the family ranch on the reservation that she was forced to leave to come to school. First published in 1992 in Canada, where it won the Sheila A. Egoff Children's Book Prize, this autobiographical novel is written in the form of Seepeetza's diary in her sixth-grade year in the 1950s.

**Rationale**

Shirley Sterling’s *My Name is Seepeetza* is one of the first novels about the residential schools written specifically for young readers. The journal style of the novel written from the perspective of a 6th grader makes the difficult subject matter very accessible to young readers. In exposing students to Aboriginal issues and texts, the issue of the residential schools is one that must be included. To read about these events in a fictitious form enables the reader to imagine these events through the eyes of the children who were subjected to the atrocities. Besides dealing with the residential schools, this award-winning novel explores themes of racism, the power of family relations, bullying, and loneliness, all of which can be relatable for students in a high school classroom.

**4. Non-Fiction**

***Resistance and Renewal***



**By Celia Haig-Brown**

**Summary**

One of the first books published to deal with the phenomenon of residential schools in Canada, *Resistance and Renewal* is a disturbing collection of Native perspectives on the Kamloops Indian Residential School (KIRS) in the British Columbia interior. Interviews with thirteen Natives, all former residents of KIRS, form the nucleus of the book, a frank depiction of school life, and a telling account of the system's oppressive environment, which sought to stifle Native culture.

**Rationale**

More books have been written more recently that recount the atrocities that took place in the residential schools, but Celia Haig-Brown’s *Resistance and Renewal* is one of the first books published that dealt with the issue. It took many years for the people whose lives were greatly affected by the residential school to feel comfortable to discuss the events. In Brown’s research, she was able to interview many of these people who opened up to her and shared some of their personal stories from childhood. This non-fiction text is a great accompaniment to the fictitious account of similar events in *My Name is Seepeetza*. This book gives vivid and factual descriptions of what actually took place in these schools. Though disturbing and difficult to read, it is necessary to discuss the residential schools in a study of Aboriginal issues and texts.

**5. Speech as Text**

**Stephen Harper’s Apology**



**Summary**

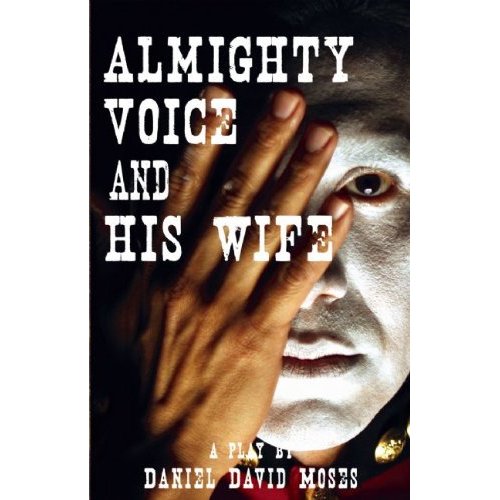
In 2008 in the House of Commons, Prime Minister Stephen Harper offered an official apology to the students of residential schools on behalf of the Government of Canada. Harper acknowledged the atrocities that took place in these schools and the lasting impact they had on the students, their families, and all Aboriginal peoples. Textual transcripts and video of this official apology are easily found on the Internet.

**Rationale**

This text can serve as a valuable teaching tool both in terms of textual style and content. Speech is a unique textual form and an interesting one to study. It can be useful and interesting to provide students with a variety of examples of speeches, to have them criticize and analyze the writing and delivery, as well as to practice writing and delivering their own. More importantly, in terms of content, this text provides an interesting accompaniment to the study of texts that explore the residential schools themselves. Students can explore the merits and problems that accompany this formal apology. Although some people feel that this apology was a positive step forward and bridge amending relations between the Canadian government and Aboriginal peoples, there are many who criticize the value of simply a verbal apology. Critics cite the lack of acknowledgement of several issues involved in the apology, as well as a lack of real action to back up the sentiment. After a study of the residential schools, a study of this speech could lead to interesting discussions about media, and students could also look at articles reacting to these words.

**6. Drama**

***Almighty Voice and His Wife***



**By Daniel David Moses**

**Summary**

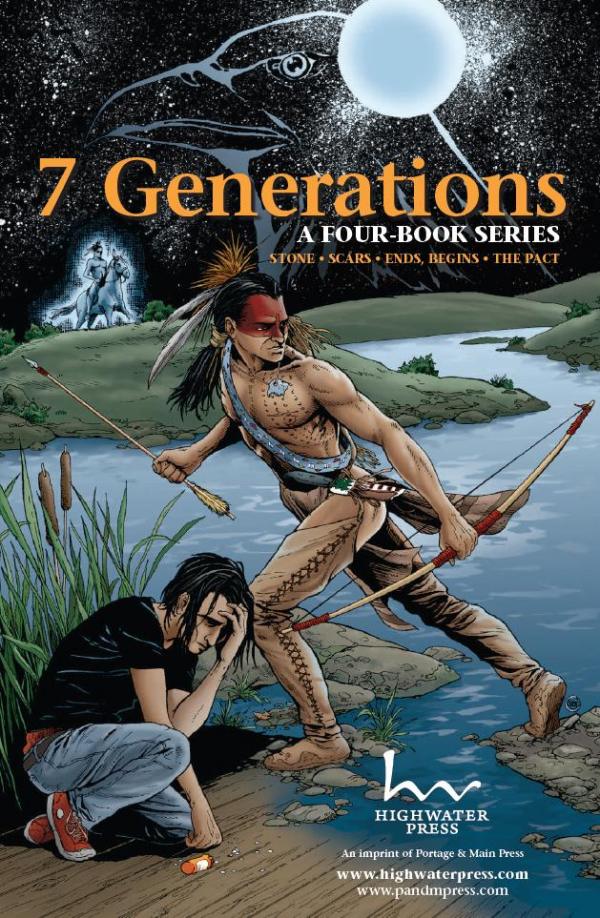
*Almighty Voice and His Wife* is an iconic Canadian play that tells the story of a Cree man arrested for killing a cow without a license. Under threat of hanging he escapes, unleashing a yearlong manhunt that gives rise to his status as a martyr and a legend. Described as “moving, disturbing, funny, confounding and beautiful” (*The Coast*), the work consists of two vividly contrasting acts that explore Almighty Voice as both victim and hero. The first act is a tender and intimate portrait of him and his wife in life; the second is an outlandish white-faced vaudeville routine of the two in death.

**Rationale**

Daniel David Moses’ 1991 play is an interesting study as it tells a story, partly based in fact, of a Cree man’s conflict with local authorities in 19th century Saskatchewan, as well delivers a social commentary of issues of racism. Moses uses the two contrasting acts to symbolize the contrasting societies of “White” and Aboriginal Canadians. The first act uses the traditional Aboriginal art of storytelling to portray a tragic love story, told from an Aboriginal perspective. The second act is told from a white perspective as the characters of Almighty Voice and the girl are both exaggerated in racial stereotypes. The play would work well with the other texts in the anthology as a further exploration of stereotyping in Canadian society. The use of white-face in the second act could lead to interesting discussions of racism and comparisons to “black-face” and other examples of racism.

**7. Graphic Novel**

***7 Generations***



**By David Alexander Robinson**

**Summary**

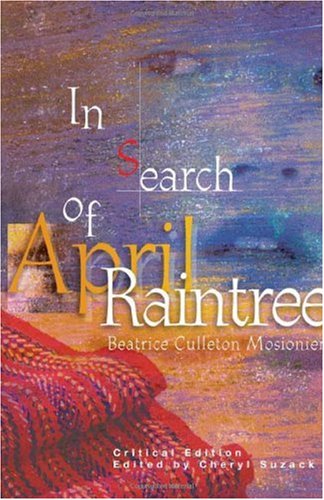
*7 Generations* is an epic, 4-book graphic novel series that spans three centuries and seven generations. The central character in the series is Edwin. Edwin, an Aboriginal teenager, must learn of his family’s past if he is to have any future. The impact of his journey of discovery, and the revelation that follows, will change his life. The first graphic novel introduces Edwin and explores the coming of age of his ancestor in the early 19th century. The second book looks at the Aboriginal experience of the small pox epidemic in the late 19th century. The third book focuses on Edwin’s father as a student in the residential schools. The final installment shows a reconciliation between Edwin and his father, and their efforts to build a future while dealing with their personal and cultural history.

**Rationale**

Any of the four installments of this graphic novel series would be a useful addition to this anthology or to any English classroom wishing to study the Aboriginal experience. The graphic novel form is engaging and accessible to non-readers. It also forces the reader to analyze images along with the text. Robinson writes from an Aboriginal background and portrays historically accurate accounts of many years of Aboriginal history.

**8. Fiction**

***In Search of April Raintree***



**By Beatrice Culleton Mosionier**

**Summary**

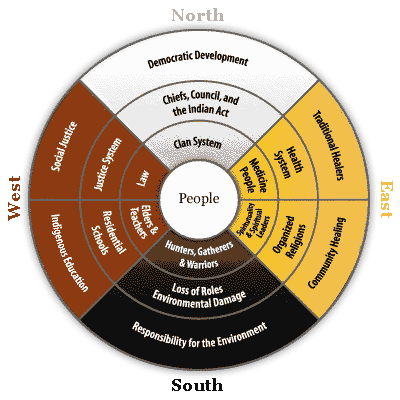
*In Search of April Raintree* is a told through the eyes of April, a young Métis girl whose parents are caring but neglectful alcoholics. The story follows April and her sister, Cheryl, as they are taken from their parents and enter the foster care system. Passed from white family to white family, their lives are comfortable at best, hell at the worst; never are they truly at home, rarely do they see their parents. Their experiences differ because they are split up almost immediately. The difference in their experiences leads them down divided paths. Cheryl initially is strongly involved in her Aboriginal culture, yet becomes an alcoholic and prostitute, and eventually commits suicide. April, less Aboriginal in appearance, tries to distance herself from her roots, but is forced to reconnect with them and to raise Cheryl’s child after her death.

**Rationale**

Though not part of the traditional canon of literature, *In Search of April Raintree* is now widely taught in schools internationally. It explores valuable themes of racism and family bonds. In relation to many of the other texts included in this anthology, this novel portrays a more contemporary Aboriginal struggle than some of the other texts that explore historical issues and events. Students can make connections between the issues explored in the other texts to the racism and persecution faced by April and Cheryl. Students can recognize the struggles that Aboriginals face today as a result of the race relations going back to the arrival of Europeans in Canada.

**9. Tradition as Text**

**The Healing Circle**



**Summary**

Aboriginal world views reflect an interconnectedness between all living forms and consider each of these forms as sacred. Cycles within nature, such as the seasons of spring, summer, fall, and winter, are a main teacher of Indigenous peoples and form the basis of belief systems. Circles, being inherently non-hierarchical and inclusive, represent respect, equality, continuity and interconnectedness. Many nations and territories recognize the image of a circle, however, each nation and culture may have their own unique meanings associated with the circle.

The Healing Circle has proved to be a very useful tool within Canadian aboriginal communities to begin the process of healing and cultural reclamation. It is used by aboriginal teachers to illustrate aspects of the indigenous community over time, and particularly how the people have been affected by colonization. People and the community are at the centre of the wheel, symbolizing the importance of community identity, history, heritage, and culture to successful and sustainable development. The community is of primary importance. Within the community, each person had his or her roles and responsibilities, each of equal value to one another.

**Rationale**

The model of the healing circle has been implemented in some schools and school boards as a method of dealing with bullying or other disciplinary issues. The concept of using the circle emphasizes healing and rehabilitation rather than punishment. In this method of conflict resolution all effected parties are brought together including the perpetrator, the victim or victims, witnesses, and authorities. All parties are given the opportunity to express how they were affected by the incident and all parties take part in a discussion of how best to resolve the issue. In this way the perpetrator is made to directly see the consequences of his/her actions. It would be interesting to explore this model in a classroom setting. Students could research the history and background to this type of conflict resolution, as well as discuss the merits and possible flaws of this method. Students could also look at how Aboriginal people have used this healing circle to deal with issues in their cultural history.

**10. Current Events as Text**

**Attawapiskat**



**Summary**

In the fall of 2011, the northern Ontario community of Attawapiskat declared a state of emergency and gained much media attention. The community lacks enough housing, as most residents live in over crowded houses or have no houses at all. The community also lacks many essential resources, including a clean and safe water supply and an elementary school. The general feeling has been that the government has not done enough, if anything, to help these people, and that pleas for help coming from this and other similar communities largely go unheard and ignored by the rest of Canada.

**Rationale**

A study of current events in Aboriginal Affairs, such as the situation in Attawapiskat, can be seen as a conclusion to follow the other texts in this anthology. Alternatively it could be seen as an introduction, or transition from reading about and studying themes of historical Aboriginal struggles and issues and applying these issues to a contemporary context. The current state of many reserves and of the Aboriginal community in Canada is a reflection of the ongoing conflict, persecution, and racism that exists in our country. Education and awareness is a first step in continuing to resolve these issues and a study of this current issue is a fitting end to this text set study.